

# *America's New Nihilism*

'Systemic racism' is a systemic forgetting of 55 years of urban policy failure.



By  
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Wonder Land: "Systemic racism" is a systemic forgetting of 55 years of urban policy failure.  
Image: Scott Heins/Getty Images

This is not 1968. It's worse.

The late 1960s were the heyday of modern American liberalism, which was then an ideology of hope. A bipartisan Congress passed landmark civil-rights legislation in 1964 and 1965. The precipitating event of the urban riots in 1968 was the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. New York, Trenton, Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, Kansas City, and Washington were on fire. Arguably back then, despite

passage of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs, not enough time had passed for liberal policies to ameliorate conditions in the inner cities.

Last week, George Floyd died after rough treatment from arresting Minneapolis policeman Derek Chauvin, who was arrested and charged with murder. Since then, there have been daily protests accompanied by riot and pillage in multiple U.S. cities. A primary claim made repeatedly this week is that the U.S., which means the American people, are guilty of perpetual "systemic racism."

It is evident from the coverage that most of the demonstrators were born after 1990. By then, the Great Society programs had been in place for 25 years, and now it is 55 years. Annual budget appropriations totaling multiple trillions of dollars on Medicaid, food stamps, welfare, public housing, rent subsidies and federal aid to public schools have produced . . . what?

Since the 1960s, essentially little has changed in the neighborhoods at the center of those long-ago urban riots. By current telling, they are about as poor, as crime-ridden, as under-educated and in poor health as they were when LBJ said he would change them. That means five decades of stasis and stagnation in America's most marginalized places, virtually all of it under Democratic—now "progressive"—political control.

The failure of the liberal model is by now so embarrassing that the current owners of that model have created an alternative universe of explanations, such as blaming it on American settlers in the early 17th century or the nonexistence of "justice."

It must be working because marchers in Paris and Berlin, of all places, are lecturing the U.S. on systemic racism. Thanks for the memories.

This is worse than 1968, because the political system is now engaged in a systemic act of forgetting. Let's forget that this policy failure has happened or why. Let's forget, for instance, that the people living in New York's public housing are [overrun with rats, unlit hallways and no heat in the winter](#). Let's forget that many blacks have indeed been left behind—by a [well-documented](#) migration since 1990 of black

Americans out of northern cities and Los Angeles into the South, where they have gone in search of economic opportunity. Let's forget, despite a massive per annum outlay on Medicaid—some \$593 billion in 2018—that black Americans still have a [higher incidence](#) of chronic disease.

Simply performing a cut-and-paste on 50 years of U.S. political history is an act of nihilism. Pummeled by activists and the media with constant accusations of “systemic racism,” as this week, and despite what many thought were 50 years of good-faith efforts on racial conciliation, people go numb, concluding that the solution being offered now is, literally, no solution.

This new progressive nihilism says the answer to inner-city crime is decriminalization. Because of New York's new “bail reform” law, most of the looters arrested [are being released](#), even as murders and burglaries [were increasing](#) in the city's poorest neighborhoods before these events.

The new nihilism minimizes this week's ideologically driven assaults on private property because it is “replaceable.” In fact, it is [well-established](#) that many of 1968's burned-down neighborhoods have struggled to revive ever since.

The new nihilism says no matter how many reform police commissioners are appointed or black mayors elected, “nothing has changed.” That is the definition of hopelessness.

It is not hopeless.

One could, for example, give people a better chance at home ownership and home equity, as HUD Secretary Ben Carson has proposed, through reforms of the mortgage-lending market and reducing regulatory hurdles to urban housing construction. Get rid of those godawful public-housing prisons. But no, the public housing authorities are patronage mills, so it can't happen.

Black parents love charter schools and voucher-supported private schools because they teach values, self-respect and hope. But no, this option for poor and lower-income parents has more Democratic Party opposition than ever. When will we see white college students marching in the streets over this moral abomination? Never.

One could argue that the job creation and rising incomes of recent years for young black Americans are more in step with the U.S.'s 244-year history of opportunity. But why bother? The nihilism of permanent guilt is easier because it substitutes sentiment for substance and absolves anyone of responsibility for past public-policy errors.

It remains to be learned how the American people, of any race, are processing the events of the past week. Media minimalism says the choice is between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. It's a lot bigger than that.

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